The Joseph McCarthy (Non) Connection

Since the declassification and public release of VENONA translations in July 1995, personnel from the Center for Cryptologic History have done considerable lecturing on VENONA—the story of the decryption of KGB and GRU messages sent during World War II. Frequently, members of the audience ask how VENONA might have influenced the anticommunist investigations by Congress in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Since many Almanac readers may also be interested in this question, we would like to present an article written by a former CCH historian.

While much remains to be researched on this question, this thought-provoking essay may help us to understand the role cryptology played or did not play in that time and in those events.

* *

Questions follow naturally from a chronological confluence of sensational events around 1950—the convictions of Judith Coplon of the Justice Department for conspiracy to commit espionage and of Alger Hiss of the State Department for perjury related to Soviet espionage; the arrests for espionage of Klaus Fuchs, Harry Gold, David Greenglass, the Rosenbergs, and others—all intertwined with Senator Joseph McCarthy's claims that the federal government was crawling with communists, and investigations by House and Senate committees and subcommittees.

As we now know, the Army Security Agency—and its successor, NSA—had solved the cipher system used by the KGB, the Soviet security organization, and the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence organization, for its messages during World War II, thanks to a cryptologic blunder by the Soviets. This cryptanalytic achievement allowed the Americans to read all or part of over 3,000 messages relating to Soviet espionage in the United States during the wartime period.

These translations remained Top Secret until NSA made the decision to declassify and release them in July 1995. Today, no one should be surprised that interested observers ask questions about the relationship of these messages to the famous espionage cases and to congressional investigations of communism in the government. Could these translations, which listed over 200 Americans as assets and contacts of the KGB and GRU, many working in federal agencies, have played a role influencing these public events? Yes, of course, on the first point, they did: as we know now, VENONA decrypts provided initial leads in the identification and investigation of the atomic spies Klaus Fuchs, Harry Gold, David Greenglass, and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

But, then, might an exposure to these translations have been the trigger which set off the Red Scare known as McCarthyism? And a related question: lawyer Roy Cohn was the chief assistant prosecutor at the Rosenberg trial and later chief counsel to Senator McCarthy's investigating subcommittee; might it be possible that Cohn was a link in a connection between VENONA and McCarthy? Intriguing questions, no easy answers.

First, the McCarthy issue. McCarthyism is defined in the dictionary as the "political practice of publicizing accusations of subversion or disloyalty with insufficient regard to evidence," and/or the "use of unfair investigative and accusatory methods in order to suppress opposition." The generally accepted birthday of McCarthyism is 9 February 1950. On that date, Joseph McCarthy, the junior senator from Wisconsin, star-

Approved for Release by NSA on 03-13-2025, FOIA Case # 114591

tled a woman's club audience in Wheeling, West Virginia, during an otherwise routine Lincoln Day speech, by waving in his hand a piece of paper on which he claimed were the names of 205 Communist agents still employed in the State Department. Apparently, these charges were originally based on FBI findings in several hundred security cases; most of the individuals were no longer with the department. But this speech ignited a firestorm of fear which lasted almost four years.

The first story can be summed up like this: On 7 January 1950, McCarthy sought the advice of three dinner companions as to how he might reinvigorate his political reputation back home in Wisconsin. He wanted, as he allegedly put it, an issue "with real sex appeal." After the group kicked around ideas about old-age pensions and other topics, so the story goes, Father Edmund Walsh, dean of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Relations, suggested the topic of communism in government. McCarthy reportedly jumped at the idea and is quoted as saying something equivalent to "That's it! The government is full of Communists. The thing to do is hammer them." The dinner was an actual event, but the other partners have always disagreed about the content of the conversation and its significance.

The second story is less likely to be true, but it's more interesting. It comes from Roy Cohn's biography of McCarthy and is cited by other biographers, but its veracity cannot be verified. According to Cohn, McCarthy told him that a military intelligence officer, "a career man in his early thirties," became disturbed by the official neglect of a two-year-old, 100-page FBI report which summarized information on Communist subversion in the United States. It allegedly contained disclosures of one-time Soviet agents turned informers, Elizabeth Bentley and Whittaker Chambers, who named dozens of federal officials as KGB and GRU spies. The "G-2" officer and some colleagues decided to approach four Republican senators, hoping one of them would take the facts to the American people. The first three refused. After talking with the officers for several hours, so the story goes, McCarthy read the report. He later told Cohn that he found the information "fantastic" and "unbelievable." Despite that characterization, the next morning McCarthy telephoned one of his night visitors "and told him I was buying the package."

But the question remains, did the VENONA translations promote in any way the birth and early growth of McCarthyism? No direct evidence has yet been found that they did. Some historians claim J. Edgar Hoover and other FBI officials fed information to McCarthy; if true, more than likely it came from the FBI field investigations rather than from VENONA. But it should be said that the testimony of Elizabeth Bentley and Whittaker Chambers was quite damning (and less classified). In other words, McCarthy did not need VENONA.

Now to the Roy Cohn connection, if any. Where might he fit in this puzzle? Did Cohn have access to VENONA while serving as assistant prosecutor at the Rosenberg trial, and did he pass any of it to McCarthy?

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, on the basis of several VENONA translations, were investigated by the FBI and arrested for espionage in the summer of 1950. They were tried in 1951, and after many appeals, including to the White House and the Supreme Court, were executed in 1953.

Roy Cohn became the chief assistant prosecutor for the Rosenberg trial when it began in the spring of 1951. According to Alan Dershowitz, presiding trial judge Irving Kaufman had been informed of the existence of the VENONA translations implicating the Rosenbergs, and Cohn found out about them from alleged "secret phone conversations" with Kaufman during the trial. But even if this story of illegal trial

activity is true, it happened thirteen months after McCarthy made the Wheeling speech and half a year after Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested. Moreover, the evidence is pretty clear that Roy Cohn did not even meet Joseph McCarthy until the night of the senator's reelection victory in November 1952 and did not go to work for him until early 1953.

The question of McCarthy's access to VENONA material, then, is an intriguing possibility, but, so far, it is still nothing more than a possibility, and an unlikely one at that.

(Based on materials contained in the VENONA brochures published by the CCH. Additional material from Robert J. Lamphere & Tom Shachtman, *The FBI-KGB War* (New York: Random House, 1986); David M. Oshinsky, *A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy* (New York: The Free Press, 1983); John G. Adams, *Without Precedent: The Story of the Death of McCarthyism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1983); Thomas C. Reeves, *The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy: A Biography* (New York: Stein and Day, 1982); Lately Thomas, *When Even Angels Wept: The Senator Joseph McCarthy Affair* (New York: Morrow, 1973); Roy Cohn, *McCarthy* (New York: New American Library, 1968); Nicholas von Hoffman, *Citizen Cohn* (New York: Doubleday, 1988); and Alan Dershowitz, "Rosenbergs were Guilty—and Framed," a column, 25 July 1995.)